

Forest Plan Revision for the Colville, and the Okanogan- Wenatchee National Forests March 21, 2006

Briefing: RECREATION

Trends in Demand and Use

Demand for access to the National Forests for recreation purposes has been increasing for the past 15 years since the last Forest Plans were developed. Because of the rising demand for recreation opportunities on public land, and the increasing economic dependency on that use, there have been several studies in the past decade to assess use and trends. The results are not all consistent. Fortunately, there are several surveys of merit that have been regional in scale, rather than national in scale. This paper discusses the trends that show reliable results, and summarizes consistent findings. Although studies vary in their results, there are several trends that are common in every study:

The national population is growing; the amount of people recreating in the outdoors is increasing with the growing population; the diversity of ethnic groups is growing and more women are participating in outdoor recreation; the average age of people recreating is getting older; although the most popular recreation activities have held steady (camping and hiking), and are still the most popular activities, there are new ones that are growing significantly in demand. Because of our fast-paced society and career minded parents with children, people use the National Forests for shorter durations—they want more weekend experiences rather than multi-week ventures.¹

Statewide, population is expected to grow 13.9% between 2005 and 2015. The Hispanic population is expected to increase substantially, and the Asian/Pacific Islander population is expected to increase almost as much, from about 425,000 in 2005 to 700,000 in 2025 in Washington State alone (Hall, 2005). Surveys have shown that many Hispanic people prefer camping in a group atmosphere and enjoy activities that involve the whole family. There is very little known at this time about preferred outdoor activities for the Asian/Pacific Islander population. Monitoring for satisfaction will continue, and future surveys may start to show trends in Asian/Pacific Islander activities.

According to Roper surveys in 2000, more strenuous activities start dropping off after age 65, but with Americans remaining active into older years, those who reach age 65 in the next 10-15 years will continue to be vigorous in their activities. (Hall, 2005) This implies that less challenging activities may drop off with an aging population, but with the oldsters yet to be, they may still demand the challenging experiences, particularly after they retire and have more leisure time.

¹ Hall, *Likely Trends in National Forest Recreation in Region Six (Draft)*, University of Idaho, 2005; Hall, *Understanding Recreation Trends in the Pacific Northwest: State of Knowledge and Manger's Needs (Draft)*, University of Idaho, 2004; SCORP, 2002-2007; Outdoor Industry, 2005; USDI F&WS, 2001

The Wenatchee Forest Plan (1990) predicted 2.5 million recreation visitor days (RVDs—12 visitor hours in a day. This could be one person for 12 hours, or 12 persons for one hour) annually in the first decade after the plan was written. Recent NVUM data shows there are 4.4 million RVDs in 2001—almost twice as many as originally predicted.

The Colville Forest Plan (1988) predicted an annual use of 1.2 million RVDs in the first decade after the plan was written, and the NVUM report estimated there are 1.4 million RVDs in 2003.

The Okanogan National Forest Plan (1989) predicted 1.3 million RVDs annually; the NVUM data estimated 1.2 million RVDs in 2000.

With the increasing and changing demands, contentious arguments have emerged between members of the public who have conflicting views as to what provides a quality recreation experience, and how the National Forests should be managed for recreation. The Forests have been challenged to balance those conflicting demands.

Trails

Trail use on all three Forests has remained stable. However, the type of use on trails is changing; and with changing uses (increase in Mt. bikes and motorized equipment), there have been challenges in offering opportunities for the newer uses in combination with the traditional uses (hikers and horse-riders). There are fewer over-night hiking trips and more day-hike trips and this includes wilderness hikes as well. Winter trails have become more important, and there are grooming agreements associated with many of them.

Because there is already an extensive trail system on the Forests, and inadequate funding to maintain all the miles of trails that exist, there has been little or no new trail construction on the Forests in the last decade. Many trails are not maintained to the level they used to be. There has been a greater reliance on volunteers to clear their favorite trails. Without volunteer help, those trails would likely not receive maintenance on a regular basis. With the current budget outlook, this trend will probably continue.

Demand for designated OHV routes is increasing. According to the Washington State Department of Licensing, in the counties where the National Forests reside (Chelan, Douglas, Kittitas, Yakima, Okanogan, Ferry, Pend Oreille, Stevens), OHV registration have gone up an average of 26% in Colville NF counties, 31% in Okanogan County, and 19% in Wenatchee NF Counties just in the past two years (these figures do not include motorcycles). Snowmobile registration in those same counties went up 14% in Colville NF Counties, they went down 3% in Okanogan County, and down 13% in Wenatchee NF Counties. There are other counties that influence these Forests as well (Spokane, Pierce, and King) which all have increased OHV registration, but gone down in snowmobile registration from 2002 to 2004. (Washington State Department of Licensing Vehicle Fee Distribution Report, www.dol.wa.gov/)

All Forest Service roads on the Colville, Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests are closed to vehicles that are not licensed to drive on public highways, unless the road is identified (signed or mapped) as open to those types of vehicles, through Forest Orders. The new Rule for motorized recreation mentioned earlier (RIN 0596-AC11) will impact motor vehicle use on roads and trails, and most likely result in an increase of opportunities on designated routes for OHV's; however, OHV's will not be able to travel cross-country any longer. The travel atlas that is required with this rule will provide better information on access routes, and visitors should have a clear display of when and where roads and trails are open to different uses.

Although Backpacking, Hiking, and Walking are still the most popular forms of travel on trails, Mt.Biking, and OHV riding are increasing in popularity and demand.

Developed Recreation

Camping on the National Forest in developed campgrounds soared in popularity in the 1950's and continued a steady rise through the 1990's. The Forests were constantly trying to keep up with the demand for more camping units, as well as the demand for improved amenities—mostly to accommodate recreational vehicles (RV's), as well as improve the old toilet facilities.

The Forests have completed most of their needed developments and improvements in the last decade to accommodate the extra space needed, and upgraded amenities needed to meet demand, and there are no plans for extensive new construction of developed sites in the near future.

Dispersed Recreation

Forests have not been building as many new roads in the last decade as they did in previous decades, and they are closing and decommissioning more roads than they used to. There are several reasons for this: they already have an extensive existing road system and no longer need more roads for forest management; there are substantial resource concerns from the erosion and disturbance roads create and declining road maintenance budgets no longer justify keeping roads on the system that are no longer needed.

Many new roads, as well as older ones, have been given a lower maintenance level, or they have been closed or decommissioned. The total miles of system roads may not have changed significantly in the last decade, but the Forests have fewer miles of road that are maintained for easy travel for all vehicles than they did when the existing forest plans were written.

The continued reduction in roads that are easy for travel for all vehicles will cause a decline in driving opportunities for low clearance vehicles in the future.

Dispersed camping continues to be popular, but does not seem to be increasing. However, problems have occurred to other resources in the campsites that are in fragile areas such

as riparian areas. There has been an effort to place barriers to discourage access in some of the areas that have caused or could cause resource damage. This practice will continue and gain more emphasis.

Dispersed activities (not listed in the Trails section) that are increasing are wildlife watching (particularly bird-watching), rock-climbing, boating, and sightseeing. (Outdoor Industry Foundation, 2005; Hall 2005) Most reports show hunting as declining, and fishing remaining stable.

Recreation Special Use Permits

Administration of Recreation Residences and organized camps is not predicted to change during this planning cycle; nor, will there likely be any new allocations identified.

Outfitter and Guide permits are dependent on the need and demand for an activity that requires specialized skills, equipment, and/or transportation to occur. With the dynamic nature of recreation activities, it is difficult to predict what will be needed within the next decade.

It is not likely that there will be any more ski resort permits issued during the next planning cycle, nor a substantial change in Administration for those permits. However, several of the existing resorts have increased their Nordic skiing opportunities due to increased demand for cross-country skiing trails in the last decade, and may expand all skiing opportunities within their allotted permit area.

Sustainability

Outdoor recreation is predicted to continue to increase in popularity, and in economic dependency. The National Forests are viewed as the land manager with the most significant resources available for outdoor recreation in northeast Washington. The Forests have to remain responsive to the public in providing recreation opportunities on their public land.

In 2003 Senate Bill 5011 was passed in the Washington State legislature, directing the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and The Department of Trade and Economic Development (CTED) to craft a plan promoting wildlife-viewing tourism and sustainable economic development in our rural areas. This Bill was in response to results of a 2001 US Fish and Wildlife Survey that displayed the amount of money people were spending on wildlife recreation activities. Wildlife viewers, hunters and fishers alone spent more than \$2.1 billion in Washington State according to the survey. (USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, *2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife Associated Recreation, Washington*, Revised March 2003
<http://federalaid.fws.gov/surveys/surveys.html>)

An economic analysis for the Forest Service Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2004-2008

estimates the Gross Domestic Product to be \$11.2 billion from the recreation program alone for 2002. This is an estimate made from the NVUM surveys that were conducted nationwide. (www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/nvum/)

In summary, to sustain the current and predicted recreation demands on the Colville, Okanogan, and Wenatchee National Forests, statistics imply that the Forests need to continue to maintain the current high use trails for hiking and backpacking as they are still the most popular trail activities. Mt. Biking, Snowmobiling, Nordic skiing, and horse-riding appear to be remaining stable in use, and those opportunities need to be maintained at current levels as well. However, there appears to be a growing demand for OHV routes that is predicted to continue to increase, and supply may not be meeting demand in some of the areas of the Forests. The OHV use seems to cross all income levels and age levels as well, and all surveys are fairly consistent with this prediction of increase.

Budget has been declining for the past decade, and is predicted to decline further or stabilize at the level it is at now. Fostering mutually beneficial volunteer agreements will continue to be important to continue trail and trailhead maintenance and improvements, on trails that are important to some user groups, but may be falling out of the maintenance schedule.

Developed recreation is tending to stay steady, and there does not appear to be any significant demand for more facilities at this time. To sustain this recreation opportunity, it appears that continuing to correct the backlog of maintenance items, and completing Facility Master Planning documents (analysis of recreation facility needs) would be the best course. There does not seem any compelling reason at this time to increase developed recreation facilities.

Dispersed camping appears to be remaining stable, however with a reduction in funds to manage sanitation, and some camping spots in inappropriate locations, education on primitive camping etiquette, and possible barriers placed to discourage or prevent camping in sensitive areas needs to be emphasized.

SCENERY

Trends

Driving for pleasure has a high participation rate across all age classes, income levels, and ethnic groups. Studies show it is on the increase. Trend data shows that viewing and photographing scenery has the highest percentage of participation than any other outdoor activity nation-wide, followed by visiting nature centers as second, and driving for pleasure as third. (Hall, 2005)

Beautiful scenery is in the eyes of the beholder, but most people expect to see natural appearing landscapes, particularly along major scenic travel routes.

Sustainability

The views of natural functioning and/or appearing landscapes is becoming unsustainable as we have not allowed them to function naturally, nor have we imposed artificial treatments to mimic natural functions due to restrictive visual quality objectives, or other constraints.

Views of many of the landscapes on the National Forest, where wildfire have been suppressed, and vegetation treatments have not occurred, are of overcrowded stands, unusual amounts of woody debris on the ground, and dead and dying timber. Some views from scenic byways such as Steven's Pass, and Sherman Pass show landscapes that did have extensive wildfire activity. Those scenes are impressive, and show a renewed forest regenerating. However, due to public safety reasons and capital investments along these corridors, landscapes may need to be artificially manipulated to prevent catastrophic wildfire events.

Sustaining a natural functioning/natural appearing landscape will be challenging along scenic corridors. Many of these corridors are within the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), where fuel treatments are needed to protect private property or public investments. Vegetation manipulation will be needed to recover ecological function, as well as visually sensitive to restore and sustain the scenic integrity.

WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

Trends

If a river has been classified as Suitable or Eligible for Wild, Scenic, or Recreational status under the Wild and Scenic River Act, the Forest Service is directed to protect all Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORV's) and free-flowing characteristics until suitability analysis is complete, and/or the river is designated under the Act by congress. (FSM 1924.2) ORV's and free-flowing characteristics have been protected for all Suitable or Eligible rivers to date on all three Forests. Administration and management direction of identified Suitable or Eligible rivers is not expected to change.

FSH 1909.12, Chapter 81.3 states: "If a systematic inventory of eligible rivers or a comprehensive Forest, Grassland, Prairie, or other comparable administrative unit-wide suitability study has been previously completed and documented, additional assessment and study at time of land management plan revision need only be done if changed circumstances warrant additional review of eligibility or if the Responsible Official decides to evaluate suitability for one or more eligible rivers in the planning process. Otherwise, the process need not be revisited in land management planning. Document this process in the revised land management plan."

After the appeal of the original three plans, and subsequent appeal agreements were made, a thorough inventory of all rivers and streams was conducted for the Colville and

Okanogan Forests. The Wenatchee was found to have already done a comprehensive inventory.

The only part of that process that had not been completed was Stage 2 of the eligibility screening for the potentially eligible rivers. That process will be completed during the Forest Plan Revision process.

Sustainability

Current administration and management of those rivers has been adequate in meeting the intent of the Wild and Scenic River Act, and the qualifying rivers are sustaining the integrity of their status.

WILDERNESS

Trends

According to Cole's research, "Wilderness use, particularly in urban-proximate western wildernesses, is increasing, and a large part of this growth comes from day use." (Cole, 2005). And looking at Hall's research, 45% of Washington State residents age 16 and older participate in wilderness and primitive area recreation activities. (Hall, 2005)

The original Forest Plans predicted wilderness use after the following planning decade (roughly after 1999), and the Wenatchee and Colville Forests under-predicted the use according to recent NVUM surveys.

According to NVUM results, the Wenatchee NF had 5.4 million more visitors in wilderness in 2001 than what was predicted to be the annual visitation in the current Wenatchee Forest Plan.

The Colville Plan predicted there would be 2400 RVDs in the wilderness every year after the first decade. Assuming all wilderness visitors are spending at least 12 hours in the wilderness, using NVUM estimates, it can be assumed that there were over 7,000 RVDs in the Wilderness in 2003.

For wilderness use the Okanogan Plan predicted the demand would be 110,000 RVDs a year; the NVUM data shows use in 2000 with 54,550 RVDs.

The NVUM results are only from one year of data, so annual estimates can not be made or predicted without more surveys.

Use is not declining in the eastern Washington Wilderness Areas, but it is changing. In general wilderness managers believe wilderness use is increasing, but not necessarily expanding. In other words, more people may be using few areas.

Since people are taking shorter trips into the wilderness, the campsites within the interior of the wildernesses are shrinking, but the campsites that are easier to get to with larger group sizes are remaining the same size as they have been for many years. There are some identified areas within some of the wildernesses that are at capacity. Although some campsites are larger due to traditional use patterns, the Wilderness Areas in general are on an upward trend in revegetation and naturalization.

Sustainability

Monitoring shows that the wildernesses on the three Forests are still sustaining their wilderness character, with the exception of some problem areas that have been identified in each one of them. Dealing with problem areas will probably occur with site specific limitations being imposed rather than wilderness-wide limitations in this planning period.

David Cole offers some suggestions for management in a paper he wrote:

- “Create and/or market opportunities for high quality wild-land recreation experience outside wilderness on and off National Forest lands.
- “Make it a priority to commit enough resources and protection to low use wilderness lands to ensure non-degradation of their outstanding opportunities for solitude and near pristine conditions.
- “In high use areas, develop and implement social standards with public input, and implement management actions to ensure that impacts to physical and biological resources are contained within standards established in the forest plan. Recognize that high use destinations may be a source of inspiration and connection to wilderness for some users.” (Cole, *Wilderness Recreation Strategy*, Jan. 30, 2003)

Monitoring will continue in all the Wilderness Areas. The way the Forests monitor may change in order to be able to make more reasonable and realistic determinations on conditions and trends, and to also streamline the process, so more area can be monitored with the declining number of personnel.